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**On Subordination, Finnish-Style:  
Questioning the category of finite clausal complements in  
spoken Finnish**

**Abstract**

This paper deals with subordination, a central concept in clausal syntax which has recently been challenged in work on various languages (e.g. Thompson and Mulac 1991, Thompson 2002, Englebretson 2003, Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen To appear). I concentrate here on complementation, but also raise a general question about the nature of clause combining in Finnish grammar. The central issue is whether it is reasonable to rely on the concept of subordination for the description of finite clause combining in Finnish, in particular when it comes to complement clauses.

**1. The concept of complementation and subordination**

Although it may be traditional to consider clausal coordination and subordination a binary division, many scholars have questioned this. Several recent studies have suggested that subordination is actually a matter of degree, so that clause combinations can be ranked from ones with no subordination to ones with a high degree of subordination (see, for example, Haiman and Thompson 1984, Matthiessen and Thompson 1988,<sup>1</sup> Croft 2001: 322–361; for a useful Finnish-language summary of the coordination/subordination distinction, see Kalliokoski 1989: 12–19).

Such a suggestion has been made for all main types of subordinate clauses. Tao and McCarthy (2001) have proposed that non-restrictive relative clauses are more independent than restrictive relative clauses; König and van der Auwera (1988) claim that adverbial clauses vary in their degree of subordination; and a similar suggestion has also been made regarding complement clauses by Givón (1990: 516–561). Givón proposes

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson and her co-authors go even further, suggesting that clausal subordination may not be a grammatical category at all (Haiman & Thompson 1984: 510).

that complementation is organized iconically so that a closer semantic bond between the two ‘events’, the one coded by the complement-taking predicate (henceforth, CTP) and the one coded by the verb in the complement clause, results in a higher level of syntactic integration. Givón uses a number of features to measure syntactic integration: the co-lexicalization vs. separation of the CTP and the complement verb, the case-marking of the subject of the complement as an argument of the CTP, morphological marking of the complement verb as infinitive vs. finite, and the absence vs. presence of subordinating morphemes, in other words, complementizers. In addition, Givón suggests that among the different types of CTPs, verbs of cognition and utterance<sup>2</sup> are the ones with the weakest bond to the event coded by the complement verb. The most loosely bound complements in Givón’s continuum are direct quotes (1990: 519; 537; see also Munro 1982, who suggested that direct quotes cannot be considered objects of the speech act verbs they occur with).

On the other hand, it has been assumed that clausal complementation is universal. Noonan (1985), in his well-known article on complementation, suggested that all languages have an indicative finite clausal complement type as well as a reduced (infinitival, participial or nominalized) complement type. This has been challenged by Dixon (1995) for Dyirbal, Thompson and Mulac (1991) and Thompson (2002) for spoken English, and Englebretson (2003) for Indonesian. All these scholars suggest that there is little evidence in these three languages for the category of complement clause.

Given this, then, what is the situation with Finnish? I will first discuss the grammatical status of Finnish complement clauses, and will then make a suggestion regarding other types of Finnish subordinate clauses.

## 2. *Että*-clauses in Finnish grammar and discourse

Traditionally, Finnish grammarians have described clauses initiated with *että*, glossable in many of its uses with the English ‘that’, as complements, in other words, they have been said to function as subjects and objects of other clauses (Hakulinen & Karlsson 1979: 346–347, 353–354; see also Vilkuna 1996: 66–68). For example, a traditional analysis of *Hän sanoi että oli väsynyt* ‘He said että (he) was tired’ would analyze the clause *että oli*

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Verbs of utterance’ is approximately the same category as ‘speech act verbs’. I have retained the term used by Givón.

*väsynyt* ‘that (he) was tired’ as an object of the verb *sanoi* ‘said’. Vilkuna notes that *että* is a marker of subordination (1996: 68), while Korhonen (1993: 114) calls it a ‘real complementizer’, in other words, a conjunction whose function is to embed clauses into a higher clause as complements of verbs and other types of constituents. However, Korhonen suggests that *että* has certain syntactic features which make it similar to coordinating conjunctions, namely that *että*-clauses cannot occur preposed to their main clause, and that *että* is optional “especially with verbs of saying and thinking (1993: 19–20)”.<sup>3</sup> Vilkuna also notes that *että* can occur utterance-initially, with no preceding (or following) main clause (1996: 68). The studies which have also considered spoken data move even further away from the traditional view in their characterization of *että*, suggesting that *että* is a particle which also functions as a subordinating conjunction. Such a description is offered by Raussi (1992), whose study is entirely based on spoken data, and by the new comprehensive grammar of Finnish, Hakulinen & al (2005). Both privilege the particle function of *että*, while also acknowledging the conjunction use.

I am going to argue here that *että*-clauses are not best described as clausal complements. First, in terms of the parameters discussed by Givón, *että*-clauses, even when they occur after CTPs, are not syntactically tightly integrated to the CTP. Furthermore, *että*-clauses frequently occur without any preceding CTP, and these independent *että*-clauses seem to share their pragmatic functions and semantic import with *että*-clauses associated with a CTP, which may indicate that they are viewed by speakers as the ‘same’ construction. In fact, there is a cline of semantic and pragmatic connection of *että*-clauses with preceding CTPs from tighter to looser to no connection (see, for example, Seppänen & Laury To appear). Further, when *että*-clauses occur after a CTP, *että* groups prosodically with the CTP, and not the following ‘complement’ clause, indicating that the CTP together with *että* forms a grammaticized, epistemic/evidential phrase, and not a main clause followed by a subordinate clause. Finally, *että* also precedes direct quotes, which are not very good candidates for complement clauses,

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<sup>3</sup> Korhonen’s examples sound impossible/ungrammatical to me without *että*. For example, she suggests (1993: 19) that it is possible to say *Maria sanoi Leea tulee*, while to me this seems like a very unlikely utterance. The question of when *että* is used and when it is not used is certainly worthy of study, and, as Korhonen notes, such a study would need to be corpus-based (1993: 19 fn 29). The spoken data used for this paper did contain examples where no *että* was used when a finite clause followed a speech act verb or a verb of cognition. An example is in line 699 in example (2).).

because they undergo no morphosyntactic modification when they are combined with a CTP. In fact, it is difficult to find any morphosyntactic modification associated with subordination in Finnish finite clauses which have traditionally been considered subordinate. For example, Finnish subordinate clauses do not differ from main clauses in terms of word order (except that relative pronouns do occur clause initially, so that one could argue there is ‘movement’ involved). There is no specifically subordinating morphology involved either.

Consider the following example,<sup>4</sup> taken from a multi-party conversation among several co-workers. Speaker JS is telling about a program she had recently seen on television.<sup>5</sup>

(1). Farmaseutit: Lehmä

690 JS >siin ‘li simmosi< ai:ka [piäniiki lapsii  
 there be.PST such.PRT pretty small.PL.PRT.CLT child.PL.PRT  
 there were like pretty small children too

691 () : [.nff

→ JS : ku ne \*kysys et \kui monta utaret lehmäl o ja  
 because 3PL ask.PST et how many udder.PRT cow.ADE be and  
 because they asked et how many udders does a cow have and

→ kaikkii s’mmo[sii:, et] kuus s’nottii ja\*,  
 all.PRT such.PL.PRT et six say.PASS and  
 all kinds of things like that et six they said

<sup>4</sup> The data for the paper come from the corpus housed at the Department of Finnish at the University of Helsinki, Keskusteluntutkimuksen arkisto ‘The Conversation Analysis Archive’. The example I analyze was originally collected and transcribed in connection with the Turku Spoken Language project in the 1960s. It was retranscribed at the Department of Finnish in Helsinki, using the transcription method originally developed by Gail Jefferson, adapted to Finnish. See Appendix for the symbols used in transcription and for morphological analysis.

<sup>5</sup> This example was also analyzed by Raussi (1992), and I am much indebted to her for her insightful analysis of the use of *että* in spoken Finnish. I am even more indebted to Eeva-Leena Seppänen for ideas on this topic; our collaboration on various aspects of *että*-clauses is the most important source of inspiration for this article (see Seppänen & Laury To appear; Laury & Seppänen 2003a & 2003b, Seppänen & Laury 2004).

694 IW : [ä @< ]

695 EK : aa[:

696 IW : [eh[h @@ ]

697 JS : <@[ne oli] kaupunkilapsii@>,  
           3PL be.PST city.child.PL.PRT  
           they were city kids,

698 LP : nii[::,  
           PTC  
           Yeah,

In line 692, we see a typical case of what has been called a ‘complementizer’ use of *että*. The *et(tä)*-clause follows the verb *kysys* ‘they asked’. In our data, *että*-clauses occurred, in addition to *kysyä*, with verbs such as *meinata* ‘mean’, *ajatella* ‘think’, *tietää* ‘know’, *nähdä* ‘see’, *kuulla* ‘hear’, *kirota* ‘swear’, and especially frequently with *sanoa* ‘say’. These have been traditionally considered CTPs. Notice also, however, that most of these are verbs of cognition and utterance, the types of verbs that Givón (1990) considered to have the weakest semantic bond with the event coded by the verb in the complement clause. This clause combination also scores at the lower end of syntactic integration according to the parameters identified by Givón. Namely, the verb *kysyä* is not co-lexicalized with the verb *o* ‘have’ in the *että*-clause, the subject of the *että*-clause is not case-marked as an argument of *kysyä*, the verb in the *että*-clause is finite, and there is a conjunction, *että*, linking (separating?) the two clauses. It is perhaps even misleading to talk of an *että*-clause since in this example, as in most of the examples in the data, *et(tä)* cleaves prosodically to the verb it follows (there is a noticeable drop in fundamental frequency after *et*), forming what appears to be a conventionalized epistemic/evidential phrase with it. It is ambiguous whether this is a direct quote or not, since there is no syntactic distinction between direct and indirect questions in Finnish<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> As an example, the question ‘Is s/he tired?’ would be translated into Finnish as *onko hän väsynyt* ‘be-CLT 3SG tired’. If the clause follows a reporting clause meaning ‘s/he asked’ *hän kysyi*, there is no morphosyntactic difference between the main clause question and the clause following, whether it is meant as an indirect question or a direct question: *hän kysyi (että) onko hän väsynyt* can be translated as ‘s/he asked whether s/he is tired’ or ‘s/he asked ‘Is s/he tired’. Presumably, the distinction between a direct and

This fact can be taken as another manifestation of the lack of syntactic integration between clauses containing a speech act verb or a cognition verb and a following finite clause.

The use of *et* in line 693 contrasts with the use of *et* in the preceding line in that it is prosodically a part of the quote it precedes. The syntactic analysis of this use is problematic; it is not clear whether *et kuus sanottii* ‘et they said six’ is an example of the types of things that happened on the program, projected by the phrase *ja kaikkii s’mmosii*., ‘and all (kinds of things) like that’. In that case, the whole phrase would be translatable as ‘and all (kinds of things) like (that) they said six’. On the other hand, *et kuus* ‘et six’ could be analyzed as a quote *kuus* ‘six’ preceded by a conjunction *et* linking it to the following speech act verb *s’nottii* ‘it was said’. In that case, the sequence *ja kaikkii simmosii* ‘and all (kinds of things) like that’ only projects backward, indicating that the question about the number of a cow’s udders is only an example of the kinds of things asked by the children, and the sequence *et kuus sanottii* ‘et six they said’ reports the answer, *kuus* ‘six’ that was given to the inquiry. In the latter case, we could say we have an *et*-complement preceding its CTP, something that at least clausal *et*-complements have been said to be unlikely to do (Korhonen 1993: 19). This *et*, furthermore, would precede a non-clausal constituent, a mere NP, *kuus* ‘six’; this is a feature uncharacteristic of subordinating conjunctions (Hakulinen & Karlsson 1979: 86). A third possibility is that *et* is an epistemic/evidential particle here, indexing that what JS is saying is something that she heard on TV, not her own thought or idea. This is a typical function of the utterance-initial particle *et*. The prosody here supports this analysis, since *et* is here prosodically initial to the phrase it precedes, and not a part of the phrase it follows. Consider the following example, taken from the same conversation as example (1), immediately following it.

Example (2) Vuohi yksin

699 JS : .hhja sit siin oli just et kysyttii >kui pal<  
 and then there was just et ask.PASS.PST how much  
 and then there was just et (they) asked how many

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indirect quote can be indexed prosodically. Note that *että* is also possible with either an indirect or a direct question, unlike the English *that*.

700 vuahii on suomes:.  
 goat.PL.PRT be Finland.INE  
 goats there are in Finland

(0.3)

701 LP : .hni[:  
 PTC  
 Yeah.

→ JS : [ja: tot' s' nottii et >ei niit o ku noin<  
 and um say.PASS.PST et NEG 3PL.PRT be PTC so  
 and they said et there are only about

703 tuhatkaksataa et sais olla paljon en:emp et se o  
 thousand.two.hundred et should be.1INF much more et 3SG be  
 twelve hundred et there could be many more et it is

704 nii vaatimaton eläin,  
 so undemanding animal  
 such an undemanding animal,

705 LP : nji:.  
 PTC  
 Yeah.

→ JS : ja semmone et se tykkää olla yksi >et se on kuulemma  
 and such et 3SG like be.1INF alone et 3SG be apparently  
 and such et it likes to be alone et it is apparently

707 niin<kade.  
 so jealous  
 so jealous.

708 LP : jaaha=  
 PTC  
 I see.

709 JS : =et se o mjalumi yksi<sup>n</sup>.=  
 et 3SG be preferably alone  
 et it prefers to be alone.

This excerpt contains several instances of the use of *et* which are in various degrees semantically, pragmatically and syntactically integrated into a preceding CTP. In line 699 we have a use of *et* following the existential or presentative expression *ja sit siin oli* ‘and then there was’, followed by a clause; here, the clause that follows could be taken as a complement of the existential construction. However, there is no *et* after the verb *kysyttii* ‘(they) asked’. We could say that *et* has been ‘deleted’ here,<sup>7</sup> a possibility not characteristic of subordinating conjunctions (Korhonen 1993: 19).

In line 702 we have a use of *et* immediately following the verb *s’nottii* ‘(they) said’, prosodically separated from the clause that follows by a change in tempo; the words following *et* are said at a faster speed than the words preceding it. This is a very typical use of *et*; it seems that combinations of *et* and the preceding speech act verb, in particular the verb *sanoa* ‘to say’, form a conventionalized epistemic/evidential phrase which expresses the footing (Goffman 1981) of the utterance that follows rather than functioning as a main clause (cf. Thompson 2002, Kärkkäinen 2003; also see Seppänen and Laury To appear). The function of such a phrase is to frame what the speaker is about to say as something that someone else, or perhaps the speaker herself, said, thought, or otherwise expressed or cognized at an earlier point. Its function is epistemic or evidential (Seppänen and Laury To appear, 2005) and the main import of the utterance is in the clause that follows the reporting phrase. Thus the ‘subordinate’ clause is not subordinate at all in a semantic or pragmatic sense. This use of *et* is followed in line 703–704 by two more clauses preceded by *et*. These clauses cannot be easily analyzed as complements to the verb in line 702, unless we claim that it is possible to subordinate serially several times over to the same main clause, an unusual and unlikely state of affairs. Instead, it seems that the reporting phrase opens up an

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<sup>7</sup> To reiterate and amplify on the point made above in footnote 6, in Finnish, unlike English, it is possible to have a complementizer intervene between a CTP and an indirect question. In other words, it is also possible to say *kysyttii et kui pal vuahii on suomes* ‘(they) asked et how many goats there are in Finland’. This makes it possible to argue that in sequences such as the one in line 699 in Example (2), we are dealing with a deletion of the complementizer. I am not in principle at all happy with such an argument, since it is rather hard to imagine how a speaker would delete something that she has already said, but that is a matter beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the ‘optionality’ of *et* in such contexts makes its status as a subordinating conjunction less certain, as Korhonen (1993) also notes.



epistemic/evidential frame, within which additional quoted items can be added, each marked with *et* to index the footing.

In line 706 we have another use of *semmonen* ‘such’ followed by an *et* clause which could be analyzed as its clausal complement. It is immediately followed by another *et*-clause, which, however, is not well fitted semantically with the preceding *semmonen*; if we assume that the second *et*-clause in line 706 is built as a second complement of *semmonen*, the sequence that results is semantically malformed: ‘the goat is such an undemanding animal and such that (...) it is apparently so jealous.’ This shows that in a sequence of *et*-clauses, it is not always possible to link an *et*-clause to a preceding CTP or other constituent whose complement it would function as. Instead, *et* seems to function on the level of footing and evidentiality in spoken data, both when it occurs independently and when it is part of a conventionalized epistemic/evidential reporting phrase.

### 3. Conclusion

I have argued in this short piece that Finnish *että*-clauses are not best accounted for as subordinate clauses. They are very loosely, and sometimes not at all, syntactically integrated into a preceding CTP or other complement-taking constituent. In terms of semantics, they seem to carry the main import of the utterance, while the reporting phrase which includes the CTP appears to function pragmatically on the level of footing; it opens an evidential/epistemic frame within which further *et*-clauses can be added in a chain in which the tokens of *et* continue to mark what is said as something someone else, or perhaps the speaker herself, has said earlier.

This examination of *että*-clauses is also intended to raise questions about all Finnish finite clauses which have traditionally been considered subordinate.<sup>8</sup> Finnish does have a number of non-finite clausal constructions which are syntactically clearly integrated into another clause, along the lines suggested by Givón (1990) and others, namely infinitive and participial constructions. At least for spoken Finnish, the concept of finite clausal subordination is, in my view, in need of re-examination.

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<sup>8</sup> The ubiquitous and highly diverse *ku*-clauses are an obvious target of study; another clause type that needs its own study is the indirect question, which I have alluded to above.

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## Appendix

### Transcription symbols

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| .      | falling intonation   |
| ,      | level or slightly falling intonation                             |
| ?      | rising intonation  |
| here   | emphasis   |
| :      | lengthening of the sound   |
| > <    | talk inside is done with a faster pace than the surrounding talk |
| hh     | audible aspiration   |
| le(h)t | talking through laughter   |
| .hh    | audible inhalation   |
| (0.3)  | silences timed in tenths of a second                             |
| (.)    | silence shorter than 0.2 seconds                                 |
| =      | no silence between two adjacent utterances                       |
| [      | utterances starting simultaneously                               |
| ]      | point where overlapping talk stops                               |
| ( )    | talk not discernible   |
| (( ))  | comments of the author   |
| @      | laughter   |

### Morphological glosses

Note: 3<sup>rd</sup> person, singular, nominative and present tense are considered default and are not marked, except that number and person are marked on pronominals.

|      |            |
|------|------------|
| ADE  | adessive   |
| CLT  | clitic     |
| INE  | inessive   |
| INF  | infinitive |
| PASS | passive    |
| PL   | plural     |
| PRT  | partitive  |
| PST  | past       |
| PTC  | particle   |
| SG   | singular   |